

Does the Use of Appreciative Advising Work?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the results of a survey completed by students who were on academic warning and agreed to attend advising sessions. The format of the advising sessions focused on the 4 Ds of Appreciative Advising with a requirement of three advising sessions and a follow-up survey. The goal of the research was to determine whether Appreciative Advising could be used as a student retention model. This paper will provide the reader with what Appreciative Advising is, how it is incorporated into the advising process, and the results of students' perception of the process through the use of an assessment.

According to Webster (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993):

Ap pre ci ate - value, prize . . . holding a person or thing in high regard

Ad vice - a recommendation offered as a guide to action

Appreciative Advising is supportive, positive, dynamic and holistic. It is designed to assist all students by changing their negative thinking pattern (if necessary), while assisting them to find what is the best of what was and what can be, through a positive interaction with an academic advisor. According to Crockett (1985), academic advising is the one system that is required by all students which has the potential to enhance student retention (organizationally).

Appreciative Advising

Vincent Tinto (1986, 1995) proposed a multivariate model of student retention to explain student departure from college prior to graduation. In his model, Tinto includes a comprehensive set of demographic, cognitive, psychosocial, psychological, and institutional factors. He also writes about the blending of the social and academic environments between the student

and the campus. It is this blending of the social and academic environments where the academic advising through the use of the appreciative model can have a profound impact. The appreciative model can assist in the development of a campus connection, linking the student with a member of the campus community. Appreciative advising is a model which includes mechanisms and processes which allow an approach to the student to occur in a positive and inviting manner. It allows the advisor to assist his or her students by integrating them into the higher education experience, enhancing their self-esteem, modifying their locus of control, and motivating them through the use of Socratic dialog. Appreciative Advising assists in shifting the advisor role from viewing the at-risk student in a "deficit" model (what the student does not have) to a "sufficient or positive" model (what the student has or can do).

Assisting the At-Risk Student

It is believed that all students can be positively affected by Appreciative Advising; it is the at-risk student who can probably benefit most. Quinnan (1997) defines the "at-risk" student as one who "is poorly equipped to perform up to academic standards." Although Quinnan's population was the adult learner, it can be applied to the general student population in that the "at-risk students can include characteristics such as low socio-economic status, academically underprepared, undeclared or lacking a major, first generation, lacking study skills, from a single parent family, an older sibling dropped out of school, had average grades of "C" or lower from eighth to eleventh grade, repeated a grade, or lacking an academic goal (Truschel and Francois, 2005).

The use of Appreciative Advising can be related to the earlier research by Seligman (1975) who coined the term "learned helplessness," which was later changed to "learned optimism." The former includes students who have an external locus of control and a belief that they have no influence over their own destiny. The result can be a lack of confidence and diminished autonomy. Grimes (1997) states that some students use learned helplessness as a self-defense mechanism to view positive outcomes as internal and negative outcomes as external. This deficit process does not assist the students to see their contributions and successes. Much in the way in which Seligman shifted from "learned helplessness" to "learned optimism," we must shift from the usual "deficit thinking" to a "sufficient thinking" advising model.

Elements of Appreciative Advising

Appreciative Advising in an academic setting allows the advisor to use an enhanced form of the problem-solving paradigm. The advisor does not look at the student as though something is broken, wrong, or just not working appropriately. The advisor should approach the student in a positive manner and use supportive language to draw out or accentuate the many successes the student has experienced thus far.

The advising process includes an introductory phase used to determine the appreciative topic around which the inquiry will be focused. The advisor should ask their students to indicate what is important to them and what achievements give them most pride. According to Cooperrider and Whitney (2000), it is important to first look at the best of “What Was” or “What Is” instead of seeing a problem. This is the beginning of what Cooperrider describes as the 4-D cycle, or the “Discovery phase.” According to Paddock (2003), the “Discovery phase” has 2 sub-steps. The first is the development of affirmative and positive questions. The questions should elicit stories about times when the student was successful. The questions should focus on the students to consider the unique strengths and values they possess. The second sub-step (also called the Dream Phase) directs students to consider their futures. They should be asked to think about what their futures can look like (in a successful mode), and how they can make their thoughts or dreams into reality. Creating an opportunity for positive dialogue is critical at this stage rather than trying to analyze the cause of students’ problems. The students should be asked what they want to see in their futures (as a core theme). The dream images will be translated into a positive and a present tense action plan. The power of this activity is that the students see the product of their dreams and they integrate it into their next steps.

Next is the “Design phase,” which is an integration of what the students wish or dream will occur in the future, also known as the goal or plan. The “Design phase” flows from the “Dream phase” with careful consideration and analysis of what can be achieved. This is when students focus on what they can do to enhance their academic strengths rather than what is customarily done such as analyzing the problems. The students will begin to lay a foundation to move toward success, creating their plans for the future.

According to Truschel (2007), the final or “Destiny phase” is the point where students take action on the plan they developed. During this stage, students should try to imagine their futures in a positive manner and begin to move their plans or goals into actions. The advisor should be aware that students often drift back to their previous failures and, therefore, should be coached to leave their past failures behind while focusing on their potential for success.

Appreciative Advising is positive and action-oriented. The advisor and the student should form a working alliance. This alliance will allow the advisor to interview the students in order to learn what is important in their lives. This will then become the appreciative topic from which the dialog will focus. During the interview process, it is important to get a complete description of what positive experience the students had in their pasts which can then be related to present issues. According to Adams, Schiller, and Cooperrider (2004), the subject of question asking is primary and universal; it is fundamental to any consideration about the ways we human beings perceive, think, feel, and make meaning. Questions are also at the core of how we listen, behave, and relate as individuals. Virtually everything we think and do is generated by questions.

A set of interview questions (located in the appendices), which were developed to be affirming and thought-provoking, were used to support the Appreciative Advising effort. During the initial advising session, it is

important to put the student at ease by making him/her feel as comfortable as possible. As the interview proceeds, it is important to accent the positive attributes, and if the conversation drifts to negative attributes, the conversation should be redirected to the strengths the person possesses as soon as the conversation allows. The advisor should maintain a working alliance and focus on developing trust and expressing genuine concern for the student's success. The advisor should ask their students important questions openly and objectively, with no special attitude or opinion presented (Giorgi, 1985).

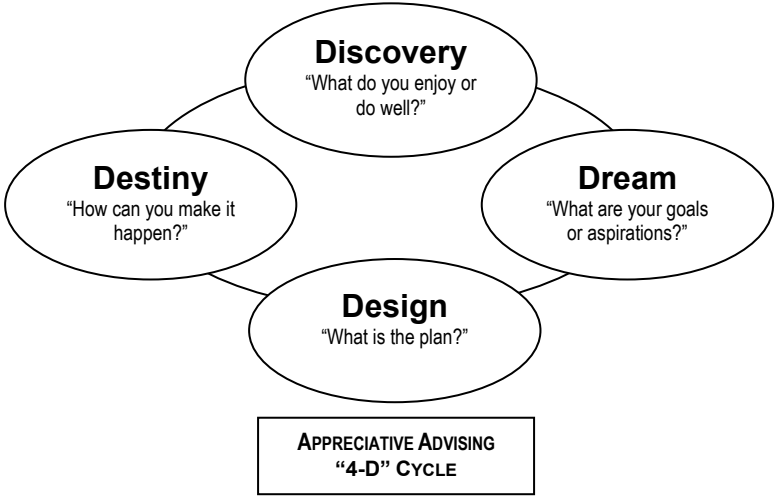


Figure 1. The 4 D Cycle of Appreciative Advising by J. Truschel. Retrieved July 25, 2008, from The Mentor: <http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor>.

As part of the Appreciative Process, it is important to acknowledge and affirm the meeting by sending a brief note (paper or email) which is designed to thank students for seeing the advisor, and if possible, to synthesize their agreed upon goals. Although this takes time, it is extremely useful because it supports the working alliance, lets the students visually see the conversation, continues to establish rapport, and supports their positive position on their plan.

Once the Discovery phase is complete and the working alliance established, it is important to work through the next phases in rapid succession, moving the locus of control from the advisor to the student. The advisor should ask the student to envision what might be, in a positive manner, asking the student to first verbalize this and then put it in writing. The student should integrate his/her wishes for the future using strengths and previous achievements. Once this is accomplished, the advisor should ask the student about his/her future, and then he/she needs to move his/her design plan into action.

Methodology

This research study examined what the at-risk undeclared population felt after they received advising related to having a quality point average less than a 2.0 and being placed on academic warning. To explore these variables, an Appreciative Advising Instrument was developed which consisted of four subscales: self-efficacy, self esteem, motivation, and commitment to the positive process. The 15 items used an ordinal scale for rating. These measures were administered to 112 college students at a Comprehensive Public Regional University.

Participants

Participants were students who obtained less than a 2.0 quality point average and had less than 30 earned college credits. Students were sent a letter indicating their academic status and were invited to a meeting with their academic advisors during the first two weeks of the fall 2006 and spring 2007 semesters. This study population consisted of a total of 112 students (58 from the fall 2006 semester and 54 students from the spring 2007 semester) and included second and third semester students who were currently enrolled at the university. Participation in the study was completely voluntary.

The participants were advised about the nature of the study and were permitted to decline participation at any time. There was no identifying information such as name, social security number, student number, address, or phone number requested as part of this research.

Students were advised three times during the first five weeks of the semester. The first session focused on developing a working alliance with the student and the use of the Discovery phase which allowed for the identification of the student's positive life themes. The second meeting included the Dream and Design phases. This included developing provocative questions for the future, such as: "What might be?" or "What are the possibilities?" Then the students were asked to develop a plan for their futures. The students were asked to focus on a vision that was realistic, rooted in strengths. The third and final meeting included the Destiny phase. This is when the students discussed the plan they would implement concerning their vision of the future - "What will be?"

Instrument

The Appreciative Advising Instrument was designed to measure the student's perception of traits such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, motivation, and commitment to the positive process. According to Cooperider and Whitney (n.d.), appreciative inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system "life" when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. The instrument was designed to determine students' belief during the discovery phase by looking at their affective characteristics. In addition to the instrument's questions, students were asked to write anecdotal information on the reverse side of the questionnaire. Questions used during the advising process are located at the end of this article. Each interview was unique in terms of the

probing or clarifying questions which were asked in order to draw out a full description in the Discovery phase. When beginning this, it is important for the advisor to “set aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allow the information as if it were for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994).

The students were requested to complete survey questions after they concluded the third and final advising session. They were asked to drop the survey off at their leisure in a drop box which was located in neutral area which was not in sight of the advisor’s office. The surveys were collected by a faculty colleague and scored. The assessment included 15 items which used an ordinal scale of “1” meaning “Strongly disagree,” “2” meaning “Disagree,” “3” meaning “Neutral,” “4” meaning “Agree,” and “5” meaning “Strongly agree.” Students were also asked to provide additional comments. The instructions on the assessment form stated, “In order to determine if this approach to academic advising is effective, it would be appreciated to obtain your comments. Please tell me how you feel and make any recommendation(s) that you feel would improve the advising experience.”

Results

The study received overwhelmingly positive results from the survey and positive anecdotal comments from the participating students. The results are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey Question Results

Questions asked	Mean
1. I believe that I have the ability to take care of the academic issues I may encounter.	4.5
2. I am competent enough to make sure that my future academic performance will be successful.	4.6
3. I now have the skills and ability to ensure excellent academic performance for myself.	4.6
4. I believe that I can handle my academic needs.	4.5
5. I have a sense of self-pride from my past academic successes.	4.6
6. How well I perform academically is a matter of my own ability.	4.5
7. I have positive feelings about the way I approach my own academic performance.	4.3
8. I now feel good about methods to cope with my academic needs.	4.3
9. My advisor listens to me and made me aware of my strengths to achieve academically.	4.5
10. My advisor helped me to refocus my efforts from negative to positive feelings about my abilities to succeed.	4.4
11. I will not hesitate to ask my advisor for academic performance assistance.	4.9

Table 1. continued

Questions asked	Mean
12. My academic performance is determined largely by what I do (and don't do).	4.9
13. I am very motivated to do well in my academic studies.	4.8
14. I am strongly motivated to devote time and effort to academic success.	4.67
15. I have a strong desire to succeed in school.	4.59
16. It is really important to me that I do well in my academic performance.	4.98
17. Overall, I rate the quality of this advisement experience as excellent.	4.81

Students were asked to provide additional comments about the advising experience. Although there were not a significant number of comments made, those that were made were also very positive. Students reported the following:

- ♦ I thought I was going to get yelled at... thanks!!
- ♦ I did not feel very good to start out, but I liked the thought that I was good at stuff before ESU so, why can't I be good at ESU!
- ♦ Believe it or not, it really helped, thanks.
- ♦ I know I did not apply myself, but I am sure going to try now.
- ♦ My parents almost killed me, thanks for a second chance.
- ♦ My grades in HS were great, what happened?
- ♦ I feel like the little engine that could, toot toot, I will!!
- ♦ Thanks for listening to me, it meant a lot.
- ♦ Ok, I'm not sure why, but I feel better.
- ♦ I know there is someone out there that believes in me.
- ♦ I will make everyone proud this semester.
- ♦ I am happy to finally find an advisor that wants to help me, the last guy yelled and made me feel like crap.
- ♦ I hate general education classes
- ♦ I know what to do, I have a tutor and will do well.
- ♦ I wish my parents listened like this guy.

Discussion

In response to the research question, it appears that students had positively responded to the first step, the Discovery phase, of the appreciative advising process. The overall rating and anecdotal comments overwhelmingly support this approach. There were a few responses (4) which received Neutral as the lowest rating.

The appreciative advising process was somewhat difficult to research because each student and interview is decidedly different. For example, student "A" may deny any real academic problems other than a lack of commitment to the learning process, whereas student "B" would take full blame and believe that he/she did not have the cognitive capability to succeed in college. The result is that each student would be asked very different affirming questions, making the process, for the most part, unique to each student. The items that were exactly the same include the assessment instrument and the pool of questions which were developed in advance of the advising sessions.

The appreciative process was very time consuming and work intensive. The students were advised three times during the first five weeks of the semester. Although this is viewed as positive, it is difficult to accomplish this when there are additional responsibilities as well as students who require attention. The at-risk sample population responded positively to this style of advising with 105 of the 112 students making and keeping all of the appointments.

On a personal level, this researcher felt uplifted and more positive as a result of the affirming interactions with the students. At the end of a busy day, there was a sense of accomplishment and positive self worth with more available energy than there had been when advising students in a negative (deficit) manner. The appreciative advising process places the burden and positive experience on the students who ultimately have control and responsibility of their academic experience.

As a study limitation, there were 146 students who were initially invited to participate in the research study with a total of 112 accepting by attending the first session. This self-selection is a variable that influenced the study, since participating students are possibly more concerned about their academic status and are more motivated to engage in the advising process.

It is believed that this positive form of interacting with students should be incorporated into learning assistance centers since it appears that the at-risk student as well as staff can derive some benefits from this approach. Administrators, faculty, staff, and tutors could benefit from learning more about the appreciative approach by incorporating the 4-D cycle in a comprehensive training program.

Future Research

It would be beneficial to determine whether the students that completed the Appreciative Advising sessions did in fact accomplish their goals to get off academic warning or probation. This would have required the students to identify themselves on the survey instrument, which was not done. It would also have been beneficial to determine if there were particular circumstances which may have had a negative impact on the student's academic progress, such as health, money, etc. I would recommend that future research which uses an Appreciative Advising Survey include a minimum of demographic information—name, student number, gender, number of hours working,

number of hours studying, socioeconomic status, and whether the student is a first generation college student—in order to obtain better demographic information about the student as well as to have the ability to track student's academic progress.

It would have been beneficial to have a control group of at-risk students who did not receive Appreciative Advising in order to determine whether there was a significant difference between student groups.

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